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Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2001
Agenda item 2 (b) (i)

Limiting meeting duration

Note by the Secretariat

I. Introduction

1. In its report on the inspection of the consolidation of technical support services in the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services (A/55/803), the Office of Internal Oversight Services recommended that the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services initiate discussions with the Committee on Conferences to identify meeting demands in order to adjust servicing capacity and to limit the duration of meetings. It recommended also that mechanisms or guidelines for meetings and conferences be established, in consultation with the Committee, to ensure that extended meetings are an exception and not the rule. Such guidelines should bear in mind the budgetary implications of extended meetings, as well as the toll that extended meetings take on the well-being of staff (see ibid., para. 72).

II. Statistical information on extended meetings and sessions

2. In order to address the problem of extended meetings, the Committee on Conferences may wish to consider reviewing the number of meetings that were extended beyond prescribed schedules, given the potential negative impact of extended meetings on the quality and efficiency of the services provided to intergovernmental bodies.

3. In New York in 2000, of the 3,719 meetings held with interpretation, 1,358 meetings (37 per cent) were extended by a cumulative time of 660 hours. Approximately the same amount of time was also lost during 2000 due to the late start and/or early ending of meetings.

4. Similarly, of the 2,530 meetings held with interpretation at the United Nations Office at Geneva, 645 meetings (25 per cent) were extended by a cumulative time of 483 hours. In addition, 163 hours were lost during 2000 due to the late start and/or early ending of meetings.

5. At both duty stations, the extensions represented 6 per cent of the total time of all meetings held with interpretation.

6. In New York, in addition to the 1,385 extended meetings held in 2000, there were 271 evening, night and/or weekend meetings with interpretation, representing over 7 per cent of the meeting workload.

7. While 80 per cent of the extensions total less than half an hour, the number of meetings extended by more than two hours increased in 2000 by almost 250 per cent compared with 1998 and by 50 per cent since 1999. The extension in 2000 of 154 and 121 meetings in New York and Geneva respectively accounted for

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almost 50 per cent of the total extension time for the two duty stations.

III. Managing and limiting extended meetings

8. In order to maximize its resources, the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services has endeavoured to project the potential additional servicing requirements of bodies that have lengthened their meetings and/or sessions. While the servicing capacity of the Department is, to the extent possible, adjusted to fulfil meeting servicing requests, that often entails short-term recruitment and the increased use of temporary assistance funds. In order to project potential servicing requests with greater accuracy, close and timely cooperation among the concerned bodies and with the substantive and technical secretariats is necessary with a view to minimizing the financial implications of ad hoc servicing requests.

9. In this way, although additional costs are incurred, the need to resort to an even more costly last-minute recruitment option is minimized. Whenever the additional services are not used entirely by the requesting intergovernmental organ, the excess capacity is then utilized on an "as available" basis to service other meetings, such as meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States. This has contributed to the increased percentage of meetings with interpretation for such groupings, as stated in the report of the Secretary-General on the provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States (A/56/213).

IV. Conclusions

10. In order to minimize the disruptive effects of extending meetings and/or sessions, the Committee may wish to consider the following guidelines:

(a) Meetings should be held during regular meeting hours, namely, 10.00 to 13.00 hours and 15.00 to 18.00 hours on working days. Services for additional meetings outside those hours would be provided on an "as available" basis;

(b) Meetings beyond regular hours, and especially past midnight, should be highly exceptional and limited to organs that have finite closing dates, such as special sessions, conferences and final preparatory meetings for such sessions and conferences, or when postponing the item is not a viable option because of legislative mandates or other extraordinary imperatives;

(c) Intergovernmental bodies should undertake the review of their meeting patterns and, in coordination with the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, adjust their meeting requests for subsequent sessions accordingly;

(d) Requests for extension of sessions beyond the originally scheduled dates, resumed sessions and other inter-sessional departures would continue to be submitted to the Committee on Conferences and handled in accordance with past practice.[1]

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 32* (A/55/32), paras. 2-4.